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III. THE 'GARBLED' BLUE BOOKS OF 1839— MYTH OR REALITY?

By G. J. ALDER

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THE Afghan war blue books of 1839 have usually been regarded as classic examples of the way official documents can be mutilated by skilful and unscrupulous editing almost to the point of forgery. Sir William Kaye's monumental and authoritative history of the first Afghan war, published in 1851, contains this crushing indictment¹:

I cannot, indeed, suppress the utterance of my abhorrence of this system of garbling the official correspondence of public men — sending the letters of a statesman or diplomatist into the world mutilated, emasculated — the very pith and substance of them cut out by the unsparing hand of the state anatomist. The dishonesty by which lie upon lie is palmed upon the world has not one redeeming feature.

This unqualified verdict, reinforced by the persuasive parliamentary oratory of John Bright,² has been accepted by practically every subsequent writer as a historical fact.³ The 1839 blue books are always either 'garbled' or something else equally uncomplimentary. Recently, however, J. A. Norris, a journalist by profession but writing on the basis of wide reading in the original sources, has challenged practically every aspect of Kaye's version of the Afghan war — and with it his classic verdict on the 'garbled' blue books. Norris concludes⁴:

Sir John Kaye waxed exceedingly indignant about the garbling and never paid attention to other possible motives... Why should Kaye be believed? He was convinced that the Auckland policy was a misguided policy, and that the decision to withhold and shorten dispatches was motivated by a feeling of guilt. The author of the present work submits that Kaye was seriously mistaken.

It seems timely, therefore, to re-examine this parliamentary *cause célèbre* in rather more detail than either Kaye in the 1850s or Norris in the 1960s could allow themselves in order to see whether any decision between them can be reached.

¹ J. W. Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan* (3rd edn, London, 1874), 1, 204-5.

² See below, pp. 250-1.

³ See among many others, V. K. Chavda, *India, Britain, Russia: a Study in British Opinion, 1838-1878* (Delhi, 1967), pp. 16 and 44; F. R. Flournoy, *Parliament and War* (London, 1927), pp. 20-1; M. H. Jenks, *The Activities and Influence of David Urquhart, 1833-56* (unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, London, 1964), p. 243; A. Law (ed.), *India under Lord Ellenborough* (London, 1926), pp. [19-20] and [47]; M. A. Naim, *Anglo-Afghan Relations, 1809-1839* (unpubl. B.Litt. thesis, Oxford, 1965), p. 125; W. A. Archbold in *Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge, 1929), v, 499.

⁴ J. A. Norris, *The First Afghan War, 1838-42* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 224 and 423.

The dramatic events in Central Asia which early in 1839 persuaded the whig government to lay papers before parliament are well known. Lord Auckland, the whig appointment to the vacant governor-generalship, had arrived in India early in 1836 with a very healthy scepticism about reports of Russian and Persian threats to the security of the north-west frontier. At the end of 1837, however, a large Persian army advanced eastwards and invested the independent Afghan frontier town of Herat. Soon alarming reports of powerful Russian financial, diplomatic and even military support for Persia's *Drang nach Osten* began to come in from John McNeill, Palmerston's trusted and able representative in Teheran. McNeill tried and failed to withdraw the Persian army. As a result, Anglo-Persian diplomatic relations were broken off and an Indian task-force seized Persian territory at the head of the Gulf. While all this was going on, Captain Alexander Burnes, Auckland's young commercial agent at the court of Dost Mohamed at Kabul, found himself at the end of 1837 embroiled in a tangled diplomatic negotiation designed to keep Dost Mohamed friendly by resolving his border disputes with Britain's Sikh allies in the east, and at the same time to prevent him and his brothers at Kandahar from seeking help from the encroaching Russians and Persians in the west. Burnes was unsuccessful on all counts. Auckland, with India simmering, became convinced during the spring and early summer of 1838 that Russian intrigue and Persian advances constituted a serious threat to India's security and, despite Burnes's arguments to the contrary, that Dost Mohamed could not be relied upon to resist that threat. An earlier treaty between the Sikhs and Dost Mohamed's exiled rival, Shah Shuja, was dug out and hastily converted into a Tripartite Treaty by the adhesion of the Indian Government. On 1 October 1838 Auckland published his declaration of war – the so-called Simla Declaration – which set out all that could publicly be stated of the reasons for the policy about to be adopted. And in December British and Sikh troops began the long marches through the Bolan and Khyber passes which in 1839 took Shah Shuja successfully back to the throne of his fathers in the Bala Hissar of Kabul.

Very little beyond the bare facts was known in London at the end of 1838 but it was enough to cause opposition to gather. Henry Tucker, the belligerent former chairman of the East India Company and a staunch tory, took the early initiative. His opposition to what he regarded as unnecessary meddling across the Indus went back at least to 1834. Now at the end of 1838, as soon as the news of the impending invasion of Afghanistan arrived, he opened a correspondence with some of the Conservative leaders and later offered to supply what information he could so that they could mount a well-prepared attack in parliament.⁵ At the same time he pressed hard in Leadenhall Street that explanatory correspondence should be laid before the court of company directors and, when only a little was given, put down a motion in mid-February 1839 demanding a great deal more.⁶ He got little

⁵ J. W. Kaye, *The Life and Correspondence of Henry Tucker* (London, 1854), pp. 490 ff.

⁶ I[ndia] O[ffice Library, London] Court Minutes B 197, fos. 256 and 271; Lushington (chairman of directors) to Hobhouse, 19 Jan. 1839, IO Home Misc[ellaneous] 836, fo. 58.

change out of Sir John Hobhouse, the President of the Board of Control. Hobhouse's view was that the Court, a body which no longer had any official part in the making of Indian policy, would have to wait until it was decided what information to lay before parliament.⁷ He was quite certain that something would have to be given. 'We expect many criticisms on the whole proceeding at the meeting of parliament', he had written to Auckland at the beginning of December 1838⁸ and had begun even then to clear the decks against that eventuality. Two days after Christmas he wrote to his Cabinet colleague at the Treasury to seek some assistance for the elderly Senior Clerk in the Secret Department of the Board, William Cabell. Hobhouse explained that as President he had⁹

... only one person to help him to prepare for a parliamentary discussion on any subject of which the details have been made matter for consideration by the Secret Committee of the Cabinet. Such is the case at this moment, when it is by no means improbable that the whole of the great enterprise in which Lord Auckland is engaged will become the subject of debate in both houses. Mr Cabell is a respectable man who wishes to do what is right, but it is not saying anything to his disparagement to assert that he is utterly incompetent to do what any President has a right to require of him.

Cabell was already overworked preparing abstracts of the copious letters pouring in from India by every mail as well as drafting many of the outgoing despatches.¹⁰ It was he who suggested a method of presenting the mass of information to parliament and he who probably did most of the editorial work when the opposition attack came.

It came as soon as the new session opened on 5 February. In the debate on the Address, Peel in the commons and Wellington and Brougham in the lords all criticized what they knew of whig policy in Persia and Afghanistan and demanded much more information.¹¹ 'The opposition', wrote Hobhouse to Auckland a few days later,¹² 'has assumed in both Houses of Parliament rather a threatening aspect but has agreed to wait for such papers and explanations as I may be able to give respecting your operations beyond the Indus'. The problem was how to give those explanations in the least damaging way. Hobhouse confessed himself puzzled.¹³ If anything beyond the Tripartite Treaty and the Simla Declaration were laid before parliament then he believed that 'the *whole* ought to be produced. Otherwise justice will not be done to the policy which the Indian

⁷ Hobhouse to Lushington, 22 Jan. 1839, IO Home Misc. 836, fo. 59.

⁸ Letter of 5 Dec. 1838, IO Home Misc. 839, fo. 36.

⁹ Hobhouse to Spring Rice, 27 Dec. 1838, *ibid.* fo. 76.

¹⁰ Only a few days after Hobhouse's letter, Cabell complained to him that he was finding the burden too heavy 'at his present time of life', B[ritish] M[useum] Add[itional] MSS 36,470, fo. 1. It is clear from the evidence in this volume that he was working a very long day indeed. The extra clerk arrived only in April 1839 when the worst of the rush was over.

¹¹ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd ser.] xlv, 19–20, 35–8. It should always be remembered that at this time Hansard is not to be relied upon as a strictly verbatim record.

¹² On 9 Feb., IO Home Misc. 839, fo. 95.

¹³ Undated memorandum, B.M. Add. MSS 36,470, fo. 20, cited in full in Norris, pp. 221–2. Cf. Hobhouse to Auckland, 19 Feb. 1839, 10 Home Misc. 839, fo. 99.

Government is pursuing, which policy is not only intimately connected with, but may be said to be founded upon the conduct of Persia and Russia'. On the other hand, Hobhouse saw three distinct objections to anything like full publication: it would 'necessarily raise most embarrassing questions regarding the state of our relations with Russia'; it would reveal vital information about Indian security; and it would weaken the war effort being mounted in Afghanistan by creating alarm and premature discussion. The last two points are obvious enough. But why, it might be asked, need Britain in February 1839 have been sensitive about Russia when she was waging a war in Afghanistan directed above all at countering Russian intrigue? The answer lies in the state of the Turkish question and in a diplomatic exchange which Palmerston had had with the Russian ambassador in London in October and November 1838. Challenged about the doings of their agents in Persia and Afghanistan, the Russians had backed down as gracefully as they could.¹⁴ Palmerston had no wish to humiliate them any further: 'that would be useful only if we wanted to lay the ground for a rupture; whereas what we want is to carry our points without a rupture; and as the Russians are disposed quietly to back out, it is not for us to criticize their gait in so doing'.¹⁵ Far from provoking a quarrel with Russia, Palmerston's Turkish policy depended on the closest co-operation with her. His particular aim was to destroy the one-sided treaty of Unkiar-Skelessi, which Russia had fastened upon Turkey in 1833 after saving her from defeat by Mehemet Ali of Egypt, and replace it with an international guarantee.¹⁶ Hobhouse's instinct in the light of all this was to publish almost nothing, but that was impossible. 'The truth is', he wrote¹⁷ later, 'we had no choice . . . and had we refused the papers, a hostile vote would have extorted them from us'.

Given that publication was inevitable, the problem then became one of deciding how to publish in the least harmful manner. It was the 'incompetent' Cabell who suggested¹⁸ how 'a complete justification of the proceedings of the Governor-General might be made out without giving any just cause of offence to Russia'. The long memorandum which follows this opening sentence is so ill-ordered that one can never be sure at any point whether Cabell is talking about the arrangement of the blue book or the strategy for its defence in parliament. His key proposal was that in the first instance Hobhouse's bare minimum – the Tripartite Treaty and the Simla Declaration – should be laid, but as a deliberate provocation to the Conservatives. 'Then let the opposition come forward and

¹⁴ The correspondence was published in *Accounts and Papers*, 1839, xl, 176–94.

¹⁵ To Hobhouse, 14 Nov. 1838, B.M. Add. MSS 46,915, fo. 137; Hobhouse to Palmerston, 16 Nov. 1838, IO Home Misc. 839, fo. 24.

¹⁶ H. Temperley, *England and the Near East: The Crimea* (London, 1936), pp. 92f; C. Webster, *The Foreign Policy of Palmerston, 1830–41* (London, 1951), II, chs 7 and 8.

¹⁷ To Auckland, 11 Apr. 1839, B.M. Add. MSS 46,915, fo. 121.

¹⁸ 'Memo. on the principle of a selection of Papers for Parliament in explanation of our proceedings in Persia and Afghanistan, and in vindication of the conduct of the Governor General, and of the British Minister in Persia', undated, B.M. Add. MSS 36,470, fo. 103.

move for further Papers, in doing which no doubt a furious attack would be made on the proceedings of the Governor-General'. This, Cabell implied, would shift from the ministers the embarrassment of naming Russia because they could plead dire necessity. And once the Russian Government had been given credit for its disavowal of its agents by the publication of the recent Anglo-Russian diplomatic exchanges, 'there would then be no occasion for reserve in regard to communicating to Parliament the accounts which have been received' of the proceedings of those agents. This could best be done by producing a selection of Indian despatches from Alexander Burnes showing the extent of Russian intrigue in Afghanistan and simultaneously a selection of foreign office papers from John McNeill doing the same for Persia. The aim throughout – and Cabell emphasized this more than once – would be to vindicate Auckland by demonstrating that the danger was so serious 'that no other course was open to his adoption than that which he was forced at last to pursue – by the substitution of a friendly for an unfriendly power in Afghanistan'.

Just how Hobhouse reacted to this or even what influence it had is not at all clear. Certainly on 18 February 1839, a fortnight after the opening of the new session, the Tripartite Treaty and Simla Declaration were laid,¹⁹ and then nothing more for nearly three weeks. Hobhouse seems to have reached no final decisions about what else to publish²⁰ until at the end of the month the initiative was taken by the 'shadow' president of the board, Lord Ellenborough. He put some questions to the prime minister in the lords on 28 February and followed this up with a specific shopping-list of requirements.²¹ Melbourne had already told the house that the fullest information would be laid. Now Ellenborough spelled out exactly how he wanted it (Hobhouse's reactions in each case are given in parentheses²²): copies of treaties with the Indus states ('these may be given'), copies or extracts of letters from Burnes during his Kabul mission ('some of these may be given'), a copy of Burnes's original instructions ('the instructions may be given'), correspondence about Shah Shuja's abortive bid for the Afghan throne in 1834 ('a selection of these may be given – the collections are exceedingly voluminous – to prepare the extracts and make the copies will require some time'). It was Ellenborough even more than Cabell who determined how the papers should be laid.

The next few weeks at the India board were frantic as documents were collected, annotated, copied, despatched to the printers, edited again, proof-checked, and finally returned for final printing.²³ The easiest came first. On 8 March Hob-

¹⁹ East India, Copy of the Treaty with Runjeet Singh and Shah Shujah-ool-Mook; *Accounts and Papers* 1839, xi, 40.

²⁰ To Lushington, 26 Feb. 1839, IO Home Misc. 836, fo. 69.

²¹ *Hansard*, xi.v, 963.

²² Enclosed in Melbourne to Hobhouse, 1 Mar. 1839, B.M. Add. MSS 36,470, fo. 150.

²³ See Cabell to Peacock, 6 and 9 Mar. 1839, IO L/PS/3/2. Much of the first editing was done on the MSS copies of the letters from India in IO Enclosures to Secret Letters from India, vols. xi.viii and xi.ix. Some of the first printed versions from which the final editing was done are in IO L/Parl./1/87.

house laid on the table of the commons the collection of treaties which Ellenborough had asked for.²⁴ This of course only provoked further pressure for papers both inside and outside parliament. Tucker, privately castigating this collection of old treaties as 'a mere mockery and insult to our understandings', put his views on record in a stiff address to the court of directors on 16 March.²⁵ In the lords on 19 March Ellenborough made his much-quoted remark that 'they might assume, from the evidence already produced, that his [Auckland's] conduct was a folly; it remained for the evidence to determine whether it were a crime'.²⁶ The next day the correspondence of 1831-5 concerning Shah Shuja's earlier expedition was given,²⁷ and a week later five more separate collections appeared. Three of them were straightforward.²⁸ But instead of a simple chronological collection of Burnes's letters, as both Cabell and Ellenborough appear to have suggested, his correspondence was presented in two parts. One, known in the board as the 'V (or Vickovitch) Papers' contained Burnes's evidence of Russian intrigue from September 1837 until January 1839.²⁹ The other, known as the 'Dost Mohamed Papers' and including extracts from some of the same letters as the first, described India's relations with that ruler between May 1836 and April 1838.³⁰

Not surprisingly, after this avalanche of paper, there was a parliamentary silence for a week or two. Then, on 11 April, Aberdeen and Wellington in the lords reproached the government for publishing frequent references to Russian intrigue without at the same time giving publicity to the satisfactory explanations already received from St Petersburg.³¹ This of course was the very thing Cabell's plan had been intended to avoid. It occurred because the foreign office was extremely tardy in producing its own collection of McNeill's correspondence from Persia and the Russian explanations.³² These papers were not laid until sometime

²⁴ Indian Papers no. 2, Treaties; *Accounts and Papers* 1839, xl, 100. It was later discovered that the texts of some of the treaties were faulty and the whole thing had to be run off again.

²⁵ Kaye, *Tucker*, p. 505. This is probably the document given in Kaye, *Memorials of Indian Government* (London, 1853), p. 266.

²⁶ *Hansard*, xlvi, 870. See also *ibid.* 791, 801-2 and 865-71.

²⁷ Indian Papers no. 3, Extracts relative to the Expedition of Shah Shooja-ool-Mookl into Afghanistan in 1833-4 etc.; *Accounts and Papers* 1839, xl, 113.

²⁸ Indian Papers no. 4, Correspondence relating to Afghanistan 131-I; Indian Papers, Copy of a Despatch from the Court of Directors of the East India Company etc. 20 Sept. 1837 131-III; Indian Papers no. 7, Occupation of Karrak 131-V. All in *Accounts and Papers* 1839, vol. xl.

²⁹ Indian Papers no. 6, Correspondence relating to Afghanistan; *Accounts and Papers* 1839, xl, 131-IV.

³⁰ Indian Papers no. 5, Correspondence relating to Afghanistan; *Accounts and Papers* 1839, xl, 131-II.

³¹ *Hansard*, xlvi, 1304-6.

³² On the preparation of this collection, see Palmerston to Hobhouse, 28 Jan. and 20 Mar. 1839, B.M. Add. MSS 46,915, fos. 151 and 161. Palmerston's own copy of a Cabinet confidential print annotated in pencil in his own hand is in P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice] F.O. 539, 1 and 2.

in the middle of April³³ and the Afghan war collection was complete.³⁴ It filled most of a stout foolscap volume of over 500 closely printed pages packed with detail, full of outlandish names and divided into nine different sections, some of which were arranged topically and others chronologically, and varying in length from a single document to a collection of over 200 pages. No wonder that one enterprising printer saw the need to reproduce the complete volume in a more manageable octavo format³⁵ while other anonymous authors rushed into print with plain man's guides designed to save the reader 'the task of wading through vast masses of irrelevant and comparatively unimportant matter'.³⁶ Nor is it really surprising that most of these works presumed that the blue book possessed 'the highest degree of accuracy that can be attained'³⁷ and regarded the case for the Afghan war as proven.

Henry Tucker did not. He submitted another long letter to the court on 12 April attacking what he called the 'mutilation' of the papers by heavy excisions, denying that the omissions could have anything to do with 'political delicacy or reserve towards Russia', and arguing that the papers completely failed to make out a case for the invasion of Afghanistan.³⁸ But Tucker, for all his pugnacity, was outside the corridors of power, although of course in close touch with the leading members of the opposition on the inside. Much more worrying for Hobhouse was the very real prospect of an attack from them in parliament.³⁹ That something was brewing was quite certain. Ellenborough, whom Hobhouse always regarded as the real enemy, composed in mid-April a document which looks as if it was intended to be the basis of an attack in the lords.⁴⁰ In the commons, Sir James Graham put down a hostile motion for 2 April after the Easter break and prepared himself by picking the brains of elderly Anglo-Indians like Wellesley.⁴¹ Graham had always been interested in India; indeed he had been

³³ Foreign Office, Correspondence relating to Persia and Afghanistan; *Accounts and Papers* 1839, XL, 171. There is some confusion about the date when this was laid, originating in an erroneous entry in the Commons *Journal*, xciv, 155. H. Temperley and L. Penson, *A Century of Diplomatic Blue Books, 1814-1914* (Cambridge, 1938), p. 71 also give the date wrongly as 26 Mar. 1839. It must have been about 15 April. See Cabell to Peacock, 12 Apr., IO L/PS/3/2.

³⁴ The bound vol. XL of 1839 also contained papers on the seizure of Aden (98 pp.) and some accounts of the East India Company (28 pp.).

³⁵ *Correspondence relating to Persia and Afghanistan* (London, 1839).

³⁶ *Notes on the relations of British India with some of the countries west of the Indus* (London, 1839), p. 3. See, too, *The Policy of the Government of British India as exhibited in Official Documents* (London, 1839).

³⁷ *Notes on the relations of British India*, p. 3.

³⁸ *Report of the East India Committee of the Colonial Society on the causes and consequences of the Afghan War* (London, 1842), Appendix D.

³⁹ See his very gloomy letters to Auckland, 16 Mar. and 11 Apr. 1839, IO Home Misc. 839, fos. 109 and 121.

⁴⁰ Memo. of 23 Apr. 1839, P.R.O. 30/12/15/5, reprinted in full in Law, *Ellenborough*, pp. 1-9.

⁴¹ Graham to Wellesley, 11 Apr. 1839, B.M. Add. MSS 37,312, fo. 146. Cf. H. Reeve (ed.), *A Journal of the Reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1852 by the late Charles C. F. Greville* (London, 1885), II, 100.

tipped as a possible governor-general when Auckland was appointed in 1835. By then he had already parted company from his former whig colleagues and his whiplash attacks on them became increasingly savage in the late 1830s as he moved closer to the official Conservative position. Other lesser mortals prepared to join in as well, such as the recently elected member for Maidstone, Mr Benjamin Disraeli.⁴² It would certainly have been a bitter debate. And yet the attack, so dreaded by Hobhouse that he fully expected the government to be defeated,⁴³ never came. There was scarcely a mention of Persia or Afghanistan in either house for the remainder of the session. Hobhouse was puzzled. His first thought was that Graham had simply deferred his attack in the hope that some great disaster would give it point. Later he convinced himself that the blue book 'had persuaded the enemy to silence'.⁴⁴ Both these explanations were wide of the mark. Peel's strategy was not to topple the whigs prematurely on an obscure and relatively trivial issue like an Indian war. He wanted the crunch, when it came, to be over some great clash of principle on a comprehensible and preferably domestic issue like the Corn Laws so that the Conservative party could stand forth and govern with a clear mandate and majority independent of the goodwill of its opponents.⁴⁵ Peel's political caution was reinforced by Wellington's habitual reluctance to indulge in party warfare when British troops were embarking on the real thing. Which of the two finally persuaded Graham to withdraw his motion is not clear⁴⁶ but it was never heard of again. The Bedchamber Crisis of May 1839 which put the whigs out of office for three-and-a-half days, the pressing problems of domestic policy, the new Anglo-Russian harmony in the middle east and, perhaps above all, the first striking successes of Auckland's policy,⁴⁷ all tended to keep the opposition quiet. On the very few occasions in the sessions of 1840 and 1841 when Afghan policy was mentioned at all, it was usually by the whigs in self-congratulation.⁴⁸ The challenge was rarely taken up.

Although all was, so far as Afghanistan was concerned, quiet on the western

⁴² Disraeli to Urquhart, 23 Mar. 1839, Balliol College, Urquhart Bequest I/J/1; Urquhart to Disraeli, 25 Feb. 1839, Hughenden Papers B/XXI/U/1.

⁴³ Hobhouse to Auckland, 16 Sept. 1839, IO Home Misc. 839, fo. 183.

⁴⁴ To Auckland, 11 Apr. and 15 June 1839, *ibid.* fos. 121 and 146.

⁴⁵ C. S. Parker, *Sir Robert Peel from his private papers* (London, 1899), II, 373ff. There is scarcely a reference to Asian affairs by Peel or his correspondents at this time in the B.M. collection of Peel correspondence. The main issues were domestic. See D. Close, 'The formation of a two-party alignment in the house of commons between 1832 and 1841', *English Historical Review*, LXXXIV (1969).

⁴⁶ See the conflicting explanations on offer in T. M. Torrens, *The Life and Times of the Right Honourable Sir James Graham* (London, 1863), II, 165; H. Reeve (ed.), *Greville Journal*, II, 99; *Hansard*, LXIV, 246; Gladstone in *Quarterly Review*, CI (1857), 252; Graham to Peel, undated (Apr. 1839?), B.M. Add. MSS 40,318, fo. 143. J. T. Ward, *Sir James Graham* (London, 1967), p. 174 completely misunderstands the affair.

⁴⁷ The arch-tory *Blackwood's Magazine*, XL (1840), 246 could only argue rather lamely that 'these glorious successes' at least 'emanated from Conservative principles'.

⁴⁸ The *Quarterly Review*, XCII (1852), 36 said not unfairly that many whigs regarded the Afghan expedition as 'the war-horse of their party'.

front in 1839-41, a row was brewing in the east during those years which was still troubling both Palmerston and Hobhouse more than twenty years later. Captain Alexander 'Bokhara' Burnes had throughout the whole of his abortive negotiations in Kabul in 1837-8 argued the case for alliance with Dost Mohamed in order to build the barrier against Russian and Persian encroachments which he believed to be so essential for India's security. Auckland had accepted his diagnosis – that India was in danger – but had rejected his treatment and had proposed instead that Dost Mohamed should be replaced by his apparently more reliable rival, Shah Shuja. When Burnes, on his way back to Simla in early June 1838 and after a final appeal for the Dost, expressed the opinion that the British government had only to send Shah Shuja with two regiments 'as an honorary escort, and an avowal to the Afghans, that we have taken up his cause, to ensure his being fixed for ever on his throne', the die was cast.⁴⁹ At the end of 1838 Captain Burnes, then aged thirty-four, became Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Alexander Burnes and went back to Kabul in 1839 with the successful British army as understudy to Sir William Macnaghten, the Envoy to Shah Shuja. It was there in the late summer of 1839 that he received a set of the parliamentary papers and first had an opportunity to compare what he had written with what was published. His reaction was explosive – and typical. 'The exposition of the Governor-General's views in the Parliamentary papers', he wrote⁵⁰ in a letter to his brother-in-law which was much quoted later,

is pure trickery, and I have said so in every company since I have read them. . . All my implorations to Government to act with promptitude and decision had reference to doing something when Dost Mohamed was King, and all this they have made to appear in support of Shah Shoojah being set up! But again, I did advocate the setting up of Shah Shoojah, and lent all my aid, name, and knowledge to do it; but when was this? When my advice had been rejected, and the Government were fairly stranded.

Burnes was an extraordinarily unbuttoned correspondent in his letters to his friends and family but he seems on the whole to have been careful in his public use of his official knowledge. Indeed, as an ambitious and now senior 'political', he had little choice. His account of his Kabul mission, published posthumously but written in 1840-1 after he had seen the blue books, is as the *Bombay Times* grumbled,⁵¹ 'a travelogue innocent of all political allusion'. Nevertheless Burnes certainly had it in mind, as indeed the preface of the book hints, to tell the inside story one day⁵²:

⁴⁹ To Macnaghten, 2 June 1839, *Accounts and Papers* 1859, Session 2, xxv, 1, 242. Auckland attached a great deal of weight to this opinion from the man who knew Afghanistan best and had supported Dost Mohamed so loyally, letter to Hobhouse, 17 June 1838, IO Home Misc. 841, fo. 180.

⁵⁰ To Colonel Holland, 6 Nov. 1839, printed in G. Buist, *Memoir of Sir Alexander Burnes* (Edinburgh, 1851), p. 60.

⁵¹ 3 Mar. 1841, p. 139. The book is *Cabool: being a personal narrative of a journey to, and residence in that city, 1836-8* (London, 1842).

⁵² Letter of 1 Apr. 1841, Buist, *Burnes*, p. 63.

I am often half disposed, now that I have launched my new Travels, to write on the political events which brought us here, and if I cannot print it in my life, leave my executors to do it, and thus furnish food for reflection on the wisdom of the world when I am food for worms.

He never did it – but in the long summer days of 1841 as the situation in Kabul slid towards catastrophe he did something nearly as explosive. He laboriously copied out, with the help of his younger brother Charles, ‘ transcripts of all his public Correspondence connected with Cabool since his first mission to that country ’ and sent it in sealed packets to his elder brother, James, for safe-keeping at Bombay.⁵³ Dr James Burnes was an influential and much respected member of Bombay society and an active Freemason (he was Grand Master for the whole of Western India). He was also the close friend of George Buist, the hard-hitting astronomer-editor of the *Bombay Times*.⁵⁴ Buist had come out to Bombay in May 1840 to take over the infant bi-weekly newspaper after the death of its founder. Within a few months he changed it, in a series of comprehensive and able editorials, from a supporter of Auckland’s Afghan policy to its most hostile critic. At the same time he pushed up its circulation as a ‘ quality ’ newspaper until by the end of 1842 it was the most influential of all Indian newspapers outside India and was extensively quoted in the London press. This success coincided with the steamship ‘ revolution ’ which, within a couple of years, brought Bombay only six weeks from London.⁵⁵ It is obvious that James Burnes had in the *Bombay Times* a very powerful engine to enlist in the defence of his brother’s reputation but he was at first extremely reluctant to use it in this way. In October 1841, for example, he refused to allow Buist to quote any of Alexander Burnes’s correspondence to defend him against an attack in a Calcutta newspaper, because it would be ‘ neither agreeable nor useful to him ’.⁵⁶ The first news of the Kabul massacre and the deaths of Charles and Alexander Burnes reached Bombay soon afterwards. This, coming on top of two other family deaths in India in 1841, seems to have crushed James for a time but he still refused to allow Buist to make more than the most limited use of Alexander’s correspondence in the long obituary notice he published in consecutive issues of the *Bombay Times* at the end of December 1841.⁵⁷ Other editors were less scrupulous. Much to James Burnes’s annoyance, the obscure *Bombay United Services Gazette* published on 25 March 1842 a miscellaneous collection of Alexander Burnes’s despatches of 1837–8 show-

⁵³ *Bombay Times*, 30 Mar. 1842, p. 206. The papers were subsequently sent home to Burnes’s father.

⁵⁴ See W. A. Laurie, *Memoir of James Burnes, KH, FRS* (Edinburgh, 1851) and the letter from James Burnes in Buist, *Memoir with Testimonials* (Cupar, 1846).

⁵⁵ On the night of 6 July 1841 Bombay received the London mails of 6 June – a record. On the political effect of these improved communications, see Wellington to Ellenborough, 4 Feb. 1843, B.M. Add. MSS 40.864, fo. 26.

⁵⁶ *Bombay Times*, 9 Oct. 1841, p. 651.

⁵⁷ Editions of 29 Dec. 1841 and 1 Jan. 1842. 2000 copies of this were later reprinted as a pamphlet and sent home.

ing fairly correctly the omissions which had been made in the blue book versions. Even then, although Buist had been thundering away in almost every editorial since January against the folly of the Afghan war and the misrepresentation of Alexander Burnes's views and urging that those who had the evidence should vindicate him, yet he respected James's wishes and completely ignored the revelations of the *Gazette*.⁵⁸ This obviously could not go on very much longer. For one thing the dispute about Burnes, described⁵⁹ with considerable exaggeration at a meeting in Bombay as 'the most distinguished public servant that Bombay has produced this century', rapidly escalated into yet another inter-Presidency quarrel between the Bombay newspapers and those at Calcutta. The latter, inspired by what Buist called 'the dregs of the Calcutta clique', argued that Burnes was as responsible for the Afghan war as the Calcutta politicals who had advised Auckland in 1838. They supported their arguments by citing extracts from official documents.⁶⁰ In this sort of situation Buist was not the man to confine himself to unsupported assertions for long, when ready ammunition lay so close at hand.

But that was not all. In May 1842 some of the London newspapers picked up the *Bombay United Services Gazette*'s revelations about the blue book suppressions and either reprinted them entire or used them to attack the late whig administration and demand that parliament should launch a full inquiry into the allegations of improper suppression.⁶¹ One Conservative M.P. at least was ready to do so. More than a month before these articles appeared, Henry Baillie, the member for Invernesshire, had received a letter from a friend of Burnes complaining that he had been misrepresented and enclosing copies of some of the full versions of his despatches. Baillie said nothing about this when he had a hurried conversation with Peel in the house on 11 April to explain why he intended to put down a motion for a full inquiry into the origins of the Afghan war. Nor did he mention it when he wrote⁶² to Peel the next day to amplify his reasons. The 1839 blue book papers, he wrote,

are so meagre [!], so incomplete, and so garbled, that I defy anyone to form, from their perusal a correct opinion upon the subject, indeed they appear to have been arranged rather for the purpose of concealment than of affording information.

Baillie ended by explaining that of course he did not wish to embarrass Peel's government. Peel was embarrassed and his reply betrayed it. For several reasons, he argued, the motion would be premature and he advised Baillie to wait and

⁵⁸ *Bombay Times*, 30 July 1842, p. 489. See especially the editions of 26 Jan., p. 60, 23 Feb., p. 124, 30 Mar., p. 206 and 2 Apr., p. 213.

⁵⁹ By Dr Kennedy, author of the first hostile book on the Afghan war. Reported in *Bombay Times*, 20 Aug. 1842, p. 537.

⁶⁰ *The Friend of India*, 9 Feb. 1842; *The Englishman*, 18 Jan., 11 Feb. and 2 June 1842; *Bombay Times*, 23 Feb., 30 Mar., 14 May, 15 June, 18 June 1842. The Calcutta newspapers naturally made great play with Burnes's unqualified statement in favour of Shah Shuja cited above, p. 237.

⁶¹ *Atlas*, 14 May; *Morning Herald*, 16 May; *Colonial Magazine*, 1 June 1842.

⁶² To Peel, 12 Apr. 1842, B.M. Add. MSS 40,506, fo. 153. See *Hansard*, CLXII, 93.

see.⁶³ Baillie did – for a month – and then at the end of May put down his motion,⁶⁴ forcing Peel in the house to urge him 'on public grounds' to postpone it yet again.⁶⁵ So anxious was Peel to keep Baillie quiet that, when the matter finally came up on 23 June, Baillie was deliberately invited to a party at the Duchess of Buccleuch's in the hope, so the story went, that the House could be counted out before he got back.⁶⁶ But even if Baillie had been persuaded by these improbable methods to abandon his motion, its seconder, Benjamin Disraeli, would not. He, it will be remembered, as a new member anxious to live down a disastrous maiden speech, had planned to criticize the Afghan war in April 1839 but had been frustrated when Graham withdrew his motion. Now, three years later and with a growing parliamentary reputation, he would not be balked again. Ever since 1839, he had kept very closely in touch with the brilliant, impulsive and paranoid publicist, David Urquhart – probably the most bitter critic of Palmerston's eastern policy and certainly the most knowledgeable.⁶⁷ Urquhart had already submitted the 1839 blue book to his own peculiar analysis in a lengthy series of articles in the *Glasgow Herald* and concluded that the documents were deliberately presented in a confused way to conceal the fact that Palmerston was a traitor in the pay of Russia.⁶⁸ Disraeli, of course, did not believe this nonsense but he admired much about Urquhart and found his knowledge a useful reinforcement to his own growing interest in Indian affairs.⁶⁹ In April Disraeli managed to drag an attack on the Afghan war into a debate on the income-tax.⁷⁰ At the end of May, after the first newspaper revelations of some of Burnes's correspondence, he asked⁷¹ Hobhouse in a brief exchange 'why he had adopted such a course with respect to the despatches of a British Minister at a foreign court, as to induce that person to say that the proceeding was a piece of

⁶³ To Baillie, 15 Apr. 1842, *ibid.* fo. 155.

⁶⁴ 'Copies of the correspondence of Sir Alexander Burnes with the Governor-General of India during his mission to Kabul in the years 1837 and 1838; also copies of the correspondence of the Governor-General of India with the President of the Board of Control, and with the secret committee of the East India Company, from the 1st day of September, 1837, to the 1st day of October, 1839, relative to the expedition to Afghanistan'.

⁶⁵ *Hansard*, LXIII, 686.

⁶⁶ Hobhouse Diary, 22 June 1842, B.M. Add. MSS 43,744.

⁶⁷ There is a considerable literature on different aspects of David Urquhart's life but the most useful general accounts are G. Robinson, *David Urquhart* (Oxford, 1920) and M. H. Jenks, *The Activities and Influence of David Urquhart, 1833–56* (unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, London, 1964).

⁶⁸ Published as D. Urquhart, *Diplomatic Transactions in Central Asia from 1834 to 1839* (London, 1841). Urquhart sent part of this to Disraeli on 24 Mar. 1841, Balliol College, Urquhart Bequest 1/1/1 and invited him down to Southampton so that he could brief him. It is clear from the Disraeli papers at Hughenden B/xxi/U that they were working very closely together at this time.

⁶⁹ Jenks, pp. 250–1. Disraeli's connexion with Urquhart was an open secret. See L. J. Jennings (ed.), *The Correspondence and Diaries of John Wilson Croker* (London, 1885), III, 9; Hobhouse Diary, 18 June 1842, B.M. Add. MSS 43,744, fo. 61.

⁷⁰ *Hansard*, LXII, 1028.

⁷¹ *Hansard*, LXIII, 1021. Hobhouse's diary account is B.M. Add. MSS 43,744, fos. 46, 47, 49–51.

trickery and fraud?' Hobhouse made a very spirited reply and ended by telling Disraeli that he would have a fuller opportunity to ventilate the whole question when Baillie's motion came up at the end of June.

Before then, however, Hobhouse gained an unexpected and very welcome ally in the person of Lord Fitzgerald, the new conservative president of the board of control.⁷² As soon as the news of the Kabul disasters had reached London the Colonial Society, a private association of about 600 members 'interested in the welfare of the British colonies',⁷³ had set up what they called an East India Committee to investigate the origins of the Afghan war. This body very quickly concluded that the 1839 blue book did not give enough information, and petitioned parliament for more.⁷⁴ The petition was presented in the lords by Lord Beaumont on 3 June 1842 and, much to Hobhouse's indignation, in the commons by his former radical colleague of the Westminster hustings, old Sir Francis Burdett.⁷⁵ Beaumont confined himself to oblique criticism of Auckland's war policy and, making no accusations of garbling, merely asked on behalf of his petitioners for more information. Fitzgerald in reply followed the orthodox Peelite line that it would be premature to produce any more papers, that in any case a substantial volume of them had been published in 1839, and that he would oppose the publication of any more. He then added,⁷⁶ although Beaumont had made no such charge,

that he thought nothing more unfair than to charge those with anything like interpolation or unfairness who, in their responsible situation, had produced papers in a certain manner. It was due to them that he should say that, having had access to all the papers in question, he could trace no intention improperly to withhold information, and that if any had been withheld it had been done upon their view . . . of the exigency of the public service.

Hobhouse never forgot this unsolicited and categorical denial of the garbling charge from his political opponent. With their leaders taking a line like this, the omens for Baillie and Disraeli's motion did not look very good. Nevertheless, Hobhouse prepared his case for the defence with immense care, working through the weekend and taking five days over it. On the afternoon of 23 June he was walking peacefully down to Westminster in the confident belief that Baillie was at the Buccleuch party and the house inquorate when he was met and told that he was wrong in both assumptions. He hurried home for his papers and returned to find a thin house but Baillie in his place and the public gallery packed. It

⁷² Fitzgerald had succeeded Ellenborough at the end of 1841 when Ellenborough went to India to replace Auckland as governor-general.

⁷³ *Rules and Regulations of the Colonial Society* (London, 1842).

⁷⁴ *Report of the East India Committee*, Appendix A.

⁷⁵ Urquhart was probably behind this too. He and Burdett were both members of the Colonial Society and he had been a recent dinner-party guest at Burdett's house, Hobhouse Diary, 18 June 1842, B.M. Add. MSS 43.744, fo. 61.

⁷⁶ *Hansard*, LXIII, 1151; Hobhouse Diary, 3 June 1842, B.M. Add. MSS 43.744, fo. 53.

included, he noticed,'⁷⁷ 'the notorious Urquhart, the originator of the motion'. Baillie rose soon after five, and he and Disraeli made a joint two-and-a-half-hour attack on the whig policy.⁷⁸ Baillie was the more restrained and Disraeli, in a wide-ranging attack, seemed to be aiming more at Palmerston than anyone else. Neither of them made any accusations of deliberate misrepresentation. It was an ineffectual performance and, so far as the garbling charge was concerned, Hobhouse had no case to answer. He answered it nevertheless.⁷⁹ He repeated his view that 'the papers laid before Parliament in 1839 do afford a full and fair view of, and a complete justification for, the expedition to the westward of the Indus'. He did not deny that Burnes entertained a different view of Dost Mohamed from that of Lord Auckland. But, he asked,

Was that a charge against Lord Auckland? Was the Governor-general to act uniformly upon all that was told him by one British agent? Was he not to consider others too? ... It has been said that all the documents were not laid upon the Table, and that parts had been omitted. That is true: but there has been no garbling of the papers. Various parts were withheld, and very reasonably so: and if I were still the Minister, and those papers were called for, I should do the like again. To have published all that Sir Alexander Burnes said, would have answered no good purpose. The only object to be shewn was, what was the cause of the war. I do not mean to say Sir Alexander Burnes did not maintain opinions different from Lord Auckland; and, as I stated the other night, the late Government published three of Sir Alexander Burnes's letters, in which he gave a decided opinion in preference to Dost Mahomed ... ; we had no objection, nor did we make any attempt to conceal Sir Alexander Burnes's opinions.

Hobhouse then quoted from Burnes letter of 2 June which had argued the feasibility of Shah Shuja's restoration.⁸⁰ 'There is no mistaking his words – two of our regiments as an honorary escort, a British agent, and an avowal to the Afghans that we had taken up his [Shah Shuja's] cause, would *ensure his being fixed for ever on his throne* – and this is the authority which Lord Auckland is charged with having disregarded'.⁸¹ Hobhouse quoted other Indian officials to the same effect, corrected Baillie and Disraeli on one or two points of fact, and sat down two-and-a-half hours after he started to great applause from the benches behind him. It was probably the most powerful speech he ever made and it sealed the fate of Baillie's motion. After some other speeches for and against, Peel, speaking very quietly, stated⁸² 'that it will not, under present circumstances, promote the public interests to produce the papers for which the hon. Gentleman has moved', mainly because of the damage it would cause to the present good relations with Russia. Baillie, probably sensing overwhelming defeat in his

⁷⁷ Hobhouse Diary, 23 June 1842, *ibid.* fo. 64.

⁷⁸ *Hansard*, LXIV, 435-60.

⁷⁹ Hobhouse's speech is *ibid.* 460-96 reprinted, at the suggestion of Lord John Russell, in pamphlet form as *The Afghan War* (London, 1842).

⁸⁰ Above, p. 237.

⁸¹ *Hansard*, LXIV, 481. Hobhouse printed the italicized words in capitals in the pamphlet version.

⁸² *Ibid.* pp. 517-23.

leader's icy disapproval, tried at the last minute to withdraw his motion but the M.P. for Burnes's home town insisted on a division. The result, soon after one in the morning, was 75 against the production of further papers and a mere 9 in favour. 'The question', wrote⁸³ Hobhouse in his diary, 'was now set at rest'.

He could hardly have been more wrong. There were at least two able men who were determined that the matter should *not* be set at rest. One, David Urquhart, was sitting only a few yards away from Hobhouse as he spoke in the commons and the other, George Buist, was 6,000 miles away at Bombay. Buist was furious when he read *The Times* report of the debate. On 13 August⁸⁴ he let fly at Baillie and Disraeli for their clumsiness in letting the whigs off the hook so easily, particularly since some of the London newspapers had already published enough to mount a damaging attack. 'Members vociferated for that which was already in their hands, and ministers refused that which they had it not in their power to withhold'. Buist had been smarting under the Calcutta newspapers' unchallengeable claim that Burnes had given in writing his blessing to the Shah Shuja candidature, and now here was Hobhouse citing extracts from the same letter. It was presumably James Burnes who showed Buist the full version and enabled him a week later to launch his bitterest attack yet.⁸⁵ Hobhouse, he argued, has done it again. He has, exactly as when editing the blue books, quoted only what suited him. Buist gave his readers the opportunity to compare the full version with the extract Hobhouse quoted in the debate and asked them

to tell us if they believe that there is a regimental mess-table in India which would not expel from the list of its members as unworthy to keep company with gentlemen, a party who should have attempted to practise deceptions such as that which the ex-president of the board of control has been guilty of in the face of parliament . . . Such profligate and shameless perversion of facts as this, is without parallel in the history of British statesmanship.

With Buist in this sort of mood the full publication of Burnes's correspondence in the *Bombay Times* was only a matter of time. The issues of 30 July and 3 August were mainly devoted to a long selection of both private and public letters, the latter with the blue book omissions clearly if not always accurately marked.⁸⁶ These caused something of a sensation when they reached London in October 1842. Back in February *The Times* had been persuaded by another of Burnes's brothers, Dr David Burnes, to publish a correction to its stated view that the Afghan war policy was that of Alexander Burnes, and since then had been attacking the war with increasing boldness.⁸⁷ But even after the Baillie debate it seems to have accepted Hobhouse's defence and made no accusations of garbling. All

⁸³ 25 June 1842, B.M. Add. MSS 43,744, fo. 65.

⁸⁴ *Bombay Times*, 13 Aug. 1842, p. 522.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 20 Aug. 1842, p. 538. A week later, p. 553, he suggested that the refusal to produce papers was a sordid put-up job between Peel and the opposition leaders.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 30 July 1842, pp. 491-3, and 3 Aug. 1842, pp. 499-500.

⁸⁷ *The Times*, 7 Feb., p. 5; 9 Feb., p. 5; 10 Feb., p. 5; 14 Feb., p. 4; 6 Apr., p. 4; and 25 June 1842, p. 6.

this was changed when Buist's revelations arrived.⁸⁸ The *Morning Herald* sneered at the tardiness of Printing House Square's conversion to the belief that deliberate misrepresentation had taken place and, with several other papers, called for a full parliamentary investigation.⁸⁹ So did David Urquhart. In a pamphlet⁹⁰ written at this time he described, in a typical piece of grotesque and purple prose, how

The [full] documents exhibit the Afghans with bended knees and joined hands, naked, defenceless, meek, and imploring; and the Protector, before whom they bow, reproaching them for hostile designs and perfidious alliance with her foes, and then dashing her mailed fist in the face of the unarmed suppliant. Having perpetuated this dastardly crime, she then submits to her own people, and to the world, falsified documents, cunningly devised deceit, to vilify the suppliant she had trampled on as he kneeled – bruised and stabbed as he fell.

With the opposition getting shriller another bid for a full parliamentary inquiry was inevitable.

It came on the first day of the 1843 session when the radical M.P. for Bath, Joseph Roebuck put down a motion for the appointment of 'a select committee to inquire into the circumstances which led to the late hostilities in Afghanistan'. Palmerston immediately dashed off a letter to Hobhouse,⁹¹ who was on holiday with his daughters in Italy, urging him to hurry home and defend himself. But he was not back when Roebuck rose on 1 March to deliver what many believed was the best speech he ever made.⁹² It was certainly a bitter and vituperative attack on the whigs. 'My charge against them is, that they have undertaken an unjust and impolitic war on their own responsibility, and that when called upon by Parliament to justify that responsibility, they have in the most unworthy manner garbled the evidence upon which their justification is made to rest'.⁹³ And yet Roebuck completely failed to make a case for the second part of his charge, as Lord John Russell was quick to point out in reply.⁹⁴ Roebuck only cited one of Burnes's despatches and one quite trivial example of an omission from it in the blue books. Disraeli spoke next and claimed afterwards⁹⁵ that he had 'at last made a great speech at a late hour, in a full house, and sat down amid general cheering'. Perhaps – but it does not read like that. Of garbling there is not a mention. Peel was⁹⁶ his usual lofty and dispassionate self. He admitted his doubts about the policy of the Afghan war but argued that

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 14 Oct. 1842, p. 4.

⁸⁹ *Morning Herald*, 15 Oct. 1842, p. 4; *Standard*, 12 Oct. and 14 Oct. 1842, no pagination; *John Bull*, 15 Oct. 1842, p. 49.

⁹⁰ *The Edinburgh Review and the Afghan War* (London, 1843), pp. 21–2.

⁹¹ On 3 Feb. 1843, B.M. Add. MSS 46,915, fo. 275.

⁹² R. E. Leader (ed.), *Life and Letters of John Arthur Roebuck* (London, 1897), p. 147. Sec. too, p. 179.

⁹³ *Hansard*, LXVII, 121.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 149.

⁹⁵ In a letter to his sister, cited in W. F. Monypenny, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli* (London, 1912), II, 159.

⁹⁶ Peel's speech in *Hansard*, LXVII, 182–91. The passages quoted are 184–5, 188 and 190–1.

it has never been the usage for any Government, on taking possession of office, to use all its power and influence in this House to bring under investigation the acts of its predecessors. It never has been the custom of the House and it would not be just now to establish such a precedent.

He would, he said, have preferred a motion for more papers to one for a committee of inquiry but he believed that enough information had been laid already to give 'a sufficient account of the motives of the individuals, on whose opinions the invasion of Afghanistan was judged to be politic and necessary'. Peel repeated his arguments of 1842 about the danger of damaging relations with Russia and concluded in wise words :

You ought to take care too and establish no precedents which may be a check upon the future usefulness of public servants. It is of the utmost importance to obtain from public servants communications which they can make with perfect confidence . . . yet what will be the consequence, if these frank statements are to be revised by a hostile committee of the House of Commons. The public servant is invited to state frankly his views to the Government, and it exercises its judgement as to the publication of papers. You, for instance, call for copies or extracts of these papers. Thus you admit, that the Government may have a discretion; that it may be justified in withholding some from your knowledge. Now the committee appointed for the purpose of conducting what has been called a judicial investigation . . . may consider that . . . no documents should be withheld. For all these considerations I conclude by entreating of the House not to . . . permit the just prerogatives of the Crown to be transferred from the Executive to a committee of the House of Commons, and by so doing, to open new quarrels, and disturb relations which are of the most peaceful and tranquil character.

There was much more from both sides but, as in the Baillie debate, the issue was really settled when Peel sat down. Roebuck made a brave attempt in his summing-up⁹⁷ to meet Peel's constitutional arguments, he gave one more 'palpable instance of falsification' in the 1839 blue book, and ended with an impassioned appeal 'in the name of honour, in the name of mercy, for God's sake, to institute an inquiry on this subject'. He was wasting his breath. In the early hours of 2 March 1843, 187 members followed Peel and Palmerston into the lobbies to reject the motion and only 75 could be found to support it.

To Urquhart the conclusion was obvious. 'What inference could any man draw from this debate, save that the two factions had come to a compromise?', he asked in a pamphlet⁹⁸ published soon afterwards, and he urged yet more motions to push Peel into a full inquiry. To Urquhart, of course, Palmerston was a traitor, and Peel was now conniving at his treachery. But many who rejected the full Urquhartite fantasy were still able to believe that there had been some jiggery-pokery with the 1839 blue books. Hostile references to the 'garbling' became a standard part of many attacks on Palmerston, whether Urquhart-inspired or not. One that plainly owed nothing to Urquhart was the widely-

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 206-12.

⁹⁸ *An Appeal against Faction* (London, 1843), p. 20. He returned to the charge the following year in his magazine *The Portfolio* (new series), II, 513.

circulated pamphlet published by 'a Free Trader' in 1846.⁹⁹ One that did was Thomas Anstey's monumental attack on Palmerston in the commons on 23 February and 1 March 1848,¹⁰⁰ and by that time the newly-elected David Urquhart M.P. was there to help as well. Anstey's monster motion actually demanded the production of papers on forty different subjects, including the Afghan war. Anstey claimed to be able to prove with the help of papers lent by the Burnes family that Burnes's letters had been edited 'so as to give to the documents thus dealt with an effect and purport entirely different from that which was intended'.¹⁰¹ He accused its authors, despite a rebuke from the Speaker, of forgery. Palmerston dealt very briefly with this particular charge, although at length with some of the others, and managed in the end to talk the debate out. Pro-Urquhart sources had it that after this *débâcle* Anstey was invited to dinner at the Palmerstons' and was shortly afterwards appointed Attorney-General of Hong Kong.¹⁰² Whether he was bought off is unknown, but Anstey certainly got the job, although not until five years later.

It was plain that Urquhart's stock by 1848 was far too low ever to get the House to take seriously the old charges of garbling. The initiative would have to be taken elsewhere and by someone less partisan. In 1852, the year Urquhart left parliament for good, John William Kaye published his magisterial history of the Afghan war.¹⁰³ By any standards Kaye was a great historian. Almost every contemporary reviewer¹⁰⁴ was impressed by his knowledge (based on military and civilian experience in India and a prodigious literary output), his lofty impartiality (he belonged to neither of the great political parties), and his authoritativeness (derived from the considerable manuscript material he had used). Unfortunately the private correspondence of both Kaye and 'the rascally Burnes family' (as Hobhouse was by then calling them¹⁰⁵) has disappeared, but it seems reasonable to assume that Kaye obtained much of the manuscript material he used from them.¹⁰⁶ Whatever the source, Kaye's opinion of the blue book quoted at the beginning of this article, along with practically every other aspect of his book, at

⁹⁹ *Lord Grey and Lord Palmerston* (London, 1846). On p. 21 is written '... I cannot forget the *Afghan Papers* ... I cannot forgive fraudulent nay, almost, literally *forged* documents - I cannot forgive that which Sir Alexander Burnes said he could not forgive, *the true words expunged from his despatches and their contrary meaning infused* - and this not as to a detail, but, on the very crowning point of all, the sum total and essence of the justification attempted'.

¹⁰⁰ *Hansard*, xcvi, 1132-1242 and xcvii, 66-123.

¹⁰¹ *Hansard*, xcvi, 1208.

¹⁰² G. Robinson, *Urquhart*, pp. 121 and 143n. Even the *D.N.B.* author is puzzled.

¹⁰³ *History of the War in Afghanistan* (2 vols., London, 1851). The 1858, 1874 and 1890 editions were all in 3 vols.

¹⁰⁴ See for example *Quarterly Review*, xc1 (1852), 11 and *ibid.* ci (1857), 258; *North British Review*, xvi (1851-2), 230.

¹⁰⁵ To Fox Maule, 16 Feb. 1852, B.M. Add. MSS 36,472, fo. 86.

¹⁰⁶ Hobhouse stated categorically that he did, in his diary on 15 Feb. 1852, B.M. Add. MSS 43,756, fo. 113. Kaye refers at different times without explanation to 'Private Correspondence of Sir A. Burnes', 'Unpublished Correspondence of Sir A. Burnes', 'Ungarbled Correspondence of Sir A. Burnes', 'Correspondence of Sir A. Burnes - privately printed'.

once transmuted the dross of mere partisan criticism into the pure gold of historical fact. And of course it gave new heart to those like Sir Henry Willoughby, M.P. for Evesham, who still wanted a full publication of Burnes's despatches. When he put down a question on the subject, Fox Maule, Hobhouse's newly-appointed successor at the board, asked his former colleague whether he would have any objection to publication *in extenso*.¹⁰⁷ Hobhouse, who seems to have been feeling a bit sore at the way he had been replaced a month before, replied¹⁰⁸ very tartly that if Kaye's book gave Burnes's despatches in full, he couldn't quite see why any further publication was necessary.

I would add that the rascallity [sic] of the Burnes family and their coadjutor in publishing confidential official papers for the sake of calumniating those who heaped powers and emoluments on their kinsman would be rather rewarded, rather than punished if the Board of Control were compelled by this proceeding to do that which it had refused to do before. However, pray look at this matter as a general rather than an individual question – and trust to your own judgment.

Fox Maule did – and when Willoughby, quoting Kaye, duly asked for more papers on 17 February 1852 he was turned down flat.¹⁰⁹

Meanwhile Urquhart was devoting his prodigious energies to extra-parliamentary agitation. It was he who was mainly responsible for the working-class foreign affairs committees which sprang up in the midlands and north in the mid-1850s to keep watch over the foreign policy of the treacherous Lord Palmerston.¹¹⁰ In July and August 1855 a great conference of delegates from these committees, under the still magnetic personality of Urquhart, enthusiastically endorsed most of the points of his earlier anti-Palmerston campaigns, including of course the charge that the prime minister had 'deceived the Parliament by falsified and garbled public papers and dispatches'.¹¹¹ Although the foreign affairs committee movement dwindled away very rapidly after the euphoria of the Birmingham Conference, the Newcastle branch remained very active. In April 1857 it published the results of its own investigation into the 1839 blue books, based on copies of Alexander Burnes's dispatches lent by his brother-in-law.¹¹² This report was probably the main inspiration for the half-a-dozen petitions for publication which came before parliament in the spring of 1858.¹¹³ The first of these was from

¹⁰⁷ Fox Maule to Hobhouse, 15 Feb. 1852, B.M. Add. MSS 36,472, fo. 84. Hobhouse was created Baron Broughton in 1851 but his birthname will be used in the rest of this article to save confusion.

¹⁰⁸ On 16 Feb. 1852, *ibid.* fo. 86.

¹⁰⁹ *Hansard*, cxix, 652–3.

¹¹⁰ On this development, see G. Robinson, *Urquhart*, chs 6–8 and Jenks, *Urquhart*, pp. 327–39.

¹¹¹ *Address of the men of Birmingham to the people of England . . . unanimously passed at the great public meeting held at Bingley Hall, 14 August 1855* (no date, reprinted from the *Birmingham Daily Press*). This was carried after hearty cheers for Urquhart, the Queen and the People (in that order!), 'concluding with three heavy rounds of groaning for Lord Palmerston'.

¹¹² The original document is apparently unobtainable but its conclusions are quoted in G. Robinson, *Urquhart*, pp. 144–5.

¹¹³ B.M. *Reports of the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Public Petitions*, 1857–8, pp. 269, 270, 519, 625 and 723.

Sheffield, and on the 13 July 1858 its M.P., George Hadfield, obtained a commons order for the publication of the full correspondence in exactly the words of Baillie's abortive motion of 1843.¹¹⁴ Just how this was obtained so easily after so many battles is something of a mystery. A commons order on a matter like this did not, of course, need the formal approval of the commons; the prior consent of the government was enough. Lord Stanley was president of the board and he apparently consulted Disraeli before deciding to publish against the advice of some of the professionals.¹¹⁵ That Disraeli should be in favour after all his earlier efforts is hardly surprising, and no doubt the secretary to the board was in favour too. His name was Henry Baillie.¹¹⁶ The biggest influence on them, if Disraeli is to be believed,¹¹⁷ was Kaye's book; and, when the full set of papers was laid before the house on 24 March 1859,¹¹⁸ the name on the cover was none other than that of John William Kaye, who had recently succeeded J. S. Mill as secretary of the political and secret department of the new India Office. Even so, the whole matter is shrouded in mystery and the official records are silent. While the papers were being prepared, there had occurred the transfer of power in India from Company to Crown. In the resulting upheaval and transfer of the board's records from Cannon Row to temporary accommodation in Victoria Street, there was apparently a wholesale destruction of departmental records deemed to be of no importance. It is at least clear that in many cases the original dispatches used to prepare the fair copy were exactly the same as were used in 1839,¹¹⁹ but there is no evidence as to how far Kaye himself was personally responsible for the compilation. The editing certainly bears evidence of haste and its marking of what was and was not omitted in 1839 by the use of square brackets is not always accurate. What is certain is that the collection was originally laid in manuscript and Hadfield, backed by Willoughby, had to fight very hard to persuade an apathetic and cost-conscious House to go to the trouble and expense of having it printed.¹²⁰

The printed version – the so-called 'ungarbled' blue book of 1859¹²¹ is about 320 foolscap pages long and contains practically all of Burnes's official correspondence from April 1837 to August 1838 as well as a strangely incomplete selection

¹¹⁴ *Journals of the House of Commons*, cxiii, 304.

¹¹⁵ *Hansard*, clxii, 80; Hobhouse Diary, 23 Mar. 1861, B.M. Add. MSS 43,763, fo. 131. There is no evidence in the Disraeli papers at Hughenden nor in the Stanley papers in the Liverpool Record Office.

¹¹⁶ Evidence that Baillie was still interested is *Hansard*, clxii, 93.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 80.

¹¹⁸ *Journals of the House of Commons*, cxiv, 131.

¹¹⁹ Some of them, marked in red ink, are in IO Enclosures to Secret Letters from India, xlvi and xlvi.

¹²⁰ *Hansard*, cliv, 184–5. Useful background is given by S. Lambert, 'The presentation of Parliamentary Papers by the Foreign Office', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, xxiii (1950), 76.

¹²¹ East India (Cabul and Afghanistan), Copies of the correspondence of Sir Alexander Burnes with the Governor General of India, during his Mission to Cabul, in the years 1837 and 1838 etc.; *Accounts and Papers* 1859, 2nd session, xxv, 1.

of despatches from India between September 1837 and October 1839. The foreign affairs committees fell on this stout volume with zeal and unleashed on parliament a well-organized minor flood of petitions in May, June and July 1860 pressing for a public inquiry into the discrepancies which had been revealed.¹²² Some committees instituted their own inquiries in anticipation. The most elaborate was by the indefatigable Newcastle committee – a lengthy pamphlet¹²³ with evidence of a great deal of painstaking detective work. Its conclusion, predictably enough, was that 'the charge of forgery against the members of the "India Board" of 1839 is fully substantiated'.¹²⁴ To the pamphlet's authors, it was bad enough that Burnes's and Dost Mahomed's true views were suppressed in order 'to represent Sir A. Burnes as the author of an expedition undertaken against his advice and in spite of his remonstrances'.¹²⁵ But much more sinister to those of Urquhartite persuasions was the discovery of what they called 'that series of perversions . . . made to suit the convenience of Russia'. They seemed to confirm what Urquhart had been arguing ever since the Afghan war began – 'that the object of its authors was to serve Russia'.¹²⁶ For all these reasons, the Newcastle pamphlet called for legal action against the surviving members of the India board of 1839. Its authors even had the cheek to send a copy to their chief victim, the now elderly Hobhouse. He, as he confessed in his diary,¹²⁷ read it and promptly forgot about it, 'being perfectly at ease as to the charge'. He may have become a little more concerned when, apparently with some difficulty, the foreign affairs committees found someone willing to make another bid for a full parliamentary inquiry. On 19 March 1861 Mr A. Dunlop M.P., 'a bitter old Scotch lawyer'¹²⁸ from Greenock, rose to propose a select committee of inquiry to investigate what he called¹²⁹ 'one of the grossest acts of falsification of public documents by which that House had ever been attempted to be deceived'. He was not surprised, he said, that his predecessors had been thwarted, since two successive presidents of the board from different political parties had both solemnly declared that there had been no garbling. Now Kaye by his history and his blue book had proved beyond any doubt that they were wrong. Dunlop said¹³⁰ that he

¹²² B.M. *Reports of the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Public Petitions*, 1860, I, 1118, 1173 and 1197; II, 1220, 1246, 1270, 1333, 1359, 1518, 1551 and 1670. There were 22 petitions in this period bearing 95 signatures and the wording of all of them was practically identical.

¹²³ *Falsification of diplomatic documents. The Afghan Papers. Report and petition of the Newcastle foreign affairs association* (London, 1860).

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 6.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 11.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 16–17, 19.

¹²⁷ 19 Mar. 1861, B.M. Add. MSS 43,763, fo. 126.

¹²⁸ Palmerston to Hobhouse, 19 Mar. 1861, B.M. Add. MSS 46,915, fo. 343. It is typical of Palmerston's energy that he could at the age of 76, after a long debate and well after midnight, sit down and write a letter like this.

¹²⁹ *Hansard*, CLXII, 37.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 38.

had read this blue book with amazement, indignation, and shame. Amazement, at the extent and audacity of the falsifications; indignation, at the injustice done to poor Sir Alexander Burnes and Dost Mahomed, and at the fraud that had been perpetrated on the House; and shame, that a Department of the Government could be found capable of resorting to such means of screening itself from censure.

Dunlop expressly disassociated himself from those who drew Urquhartite conclusions about the prime minister's treachery from the suppressions involving Russia. But so far as Burnes' despatches were concerned – and he cited more of them than any previous speaker in the house had ever done – he argued that the suppressions were motivated by deceit and by guilt. Burnes's body, he concluded¹³¹ putting the prosecution case in a nutshell,

was hacked to pieces by the Afghans . . . But his reputation was mangled still more cruelly by those who should have defended it . . . He had been falsely held out by the Government which had employed him . . . as the instigator and adviser of that unjust and calamitous war, and this for the dastardly purpose of screening themselves from a condemnation which they were conscious that they deserved, and laying on him the obloquy of a charge of which they knew him to be innocent.

Palmerston, now aged seventy-six and 'a good deal excited'¹³² by what he called Dunlop's 'violent vituperations',¹³³ replied at length and with spirit. It was Hobhouse's defence of 1842 all over again. The prime minister denied that Burnes's views had been misrepresented; he pointed out that those views were not the only ones to be considered and he argued, perhaps unwisely, that Burnes for all his energy was a political innocent whose 'confusion of ideas, misconceptions, and over-credulity' was overruled by an Indian government 'seeing further and looking deeper in the matter'.¹³⁴ Palmerston was answered by one of the most deadly of nineteenth-century parliamentary orators, John Bright.¹³⁵ Bright rarely raised his voice, but the contrast between the control of his delivery and the sweeping torrent of his phrases made a powerful impression on nearly all who heard him. On this occasion what he said was neither remarkable nor even strictly true and he did not give a single instance of garbling. But his speech was somehow remembered, along with Kaye's book, as the final proof that the 1839 blue books were indeed 'garbled'. Bright denied that Burnes's views were unimportant. If that were the case, he asked, why were such pains taken to conceal them? As if that was not enough, Palmerston has now 'stooped so low as,

¹³¹ Ibid. p. 55. Dunlop subsequently reprinted his speech as a pamphlet entitled *Afghan Papers* (London, 1861).

¹³² Hobhouse Diary, 20 Mar. 1861, B.M. Add. MSS 43,763, fo. 127.

¹³³ *Hansard*, CLXII, 58.

¹³⁴ Ibid. pp. 63 and 62.

¹³⁵ Bright had been developing an interest in Indian affairs in the 1850s, G. B. Smith, *The Life & Speeches of John Bright M.P.* (London, 1881), 1, 472. There is no reference to this debate in the Bright Papers at the B.M. but the speech is reprinted in J. E. T. Rogers (ed.), *Speeches on Questions of Public Policy by John Bright M.P.* (London, 1868), 1, 113.

throughout the whole of his speech, to heap insult upon the memory of a man who died in the execution of what he believed to be his public duty – a duty which was thrust upon him by the mad and obstinate policy of the noble Lord'.¹³⁶ The war with its 20,000 dead was a crime so enormous that the House could not properly punish it. But it should try to discover the man

who had so low a sense of honour and of right that he could offer to this House mutilated, false, forged opinions of a public servant who lost his life in the public service . . . I ask the noble lord to tell us who did it? He knows who did it. Was it his own right-hand or was it Lord Broughton's [Hobhouse's] right-hand, or was it some clever secretary . . . who did this work? I say the House has a right to know. We want to know that. We want to drag the delinquent before the public.¹³⁷

He failed of course. The truth was that neither Palmerston nor Hobhouse nor the clerks at the India Office could even remember.¹³⁸ In any case, too few members in 1861 cared about these long-dead issues to embark on a retrospective witch hunt.¹³⁹ Disraeli, twenty years sadder and wiser, summed up in a manner very reminiscent of his old adversary Peel in the earlier debates. He accepted some of the arguments of those who pressed the motion but he denied its practicability or its wisdom. The motion was rejected by 159 to 49 just before midnight on 19 March 1861. Two days later, Hobhouse met some of his old India board colleagues of 1839 and had a laugh with them about the debate. But he stopped laughing the next day when he read in *The Times* a letter from James Burnes, now like Hobhouse in retirement in London. This letter, wrote¹⁴⁰ Hobhouse, acquits Palmerston and in the coarsest language [it used Buist's 'mess-table' remark] assails another person whom it does not name but who can be no other than myself'. Hobhouse took this attack very seriously indeed. During the next few days over the Easter holiday he consulted his friends as to whether he should, as the editor of *The Times* urged, publish a reply, and finally decided not to do so. He nevertheless spent nearly every day the following week 'anticipating attacks which although unjust and unfair may give me great annoyance'.¹⁴¹ They never came, probably because James Burnes switched his fire to Palmerston in a series of letters to Downing Street beginning on 25 March 1861. He started off fairly politely by acquitting Palmerston of responsibility for the garbling of his brother's despatches but demanding that the prime minister make a public apology for the derogatory statements he had made in the com-

¹³⁶ *Hansard*, clxii, 71.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 74 and 76.

¹³⁸ See the confusions revealed in Hobhouse's Diary for 21, 23 and 24 Mar. 1861, B.M. Add. MSS 43,763, fo. 129ff.

¹³⁹ ' . . . upon a retrospective discussion no Parliament ever has condemned, probably no Parliament ever will condemn, an Administration ', Gladstone in *Quarterly Review*, ci (1857), 252.

¹⁴⁰ Diary, 21 and 22 Mar. 1861, B.M. Add. MSS 43,763, fos. 128 and 131. Burnes's letter makes an allusive reference to a remark Hobhouse made before a select committee in 1850. Report from the Select Committee on Official Salaries; *Accounts and Papers*, 1850, xv, 611, p. 203.

¹⁴¹ Hobhouse Diary, 8 Apr. 1861, B.M. Add. MSS 43,764, fo. 3.

mons debate. He ended, several letters later on 27 June, in face of aggravating silences and delays from Palmerston, with very strong words indeed:

You were a party to the original falsification of my late brother's despatches. When taxed in the recent debate with the act, you attempted to cover it by traducing his memory; and when furnished by me with proofs of the incorrectness of the assertions on which the calumnies were based, you remained silent. I know what terms would be applied to such proceedings in private life. It must now rest with the public to apply those fitting to your Lordship's position in this matter, since your refusal of justice leaves me no alternative but to publish the correspondence.

And publish he did – in a pamphlet¹⁴² with a preface which said prophetically, I have done my duty to my Brother's memory . . . I leave the world to decide between him and Lord Palmerston, and have no doubt myself of the stamp which history will place on the part originally taken by his Lordship as to the Kabul Despatches.

And there the case for the prosecution rested.

The verdict was . . . guilty. Modern historians of Palmerston's career have, practically without exception, assumed that he was somehow involved in a shady transaction designed to conceal the true opinions of Alexander Burnes.¹⁴³ And the 1839 blue books almost always carry the label 'garbled'. There are many reasons for the virtual unanimity about this interpretation, as this article will have shown. In the first place, a few able and determined men for different reasons and over the span of a whole generation gave it the support of their spoken and written words. A journalist like Buist seeking reputation and circulation for his newspaper; relatives like James and David Burnes seeking justice for the reputation of their dead brother; politicians like Disraeli, Bright and Roebuck seeking political weapons or a good cause; a dedicated publicist like Urquhart seeking to bring Palmerston to the block and perhaps himself to Downing Street; a moralist historian like Kaye seeking to demonstrate that the Afghan war was an evil which spawned evil under the workings of some great natural law. It is not, of course, suggested that any of these men were insincere or that these were their only motives. Merely, that if mud is thrown often enough some of it is bound to stick. And, as the diarist Charles Greville put it,¹⁴⁴ 'it is always difficult to turn the public when once it has received a bias, no matter what'. It is even more difficult when, as in this case, the bias is reinforced both by its innate plausibility and by the historical situation which gave it birth. Alexander Burnes had, on the strength of his great journey into unknown Central Asia, acquired by the age of twenty-eight both fame and authority. When he and his book appeared in London in the winter of 1833–4 they were both given a rap-

¹⁴² *Correspondence with Lord Palmerston relative to the late Sir Alexander Burnes* (London, 1861).

¹⁴³ H. C. F. Bell, *Lord Palmerston* (London, 1936), I, 289; D. Southgate, *The Most English Minister* (London, 1966), p. 158. Sir C. Webster (*Palmerston*, II, 744 n) denies that the Burnes blue books were exceptionally garbled but does not argue that Palmerston was not responsible for them.

¹⁴⁴ In another context, H. Reeve (ed.), *Greville Journal*, II, 149.

turous reception.¹⁴⁵ Some believed that his association with the Afghan war was one reason why it was so little criticized at first. But when later it came to be realized that he had argued a line of policy which was not followed, and when the rival policy led to the loss of an army in circumstances of peculiarly compelling and well-publicized horror, and when Burnes himself with so much promise before him was cut down with his younger brother as a prelude to all the disasters which followed, one can see that the situation was ready-made for the creation of a martyr-myth, with Burnes in the title role as 'the first victim of the Afghan war'¹⁴⁶ dying for a policy which he had opposed, and his father in a supporting role, obliged 'to step forward on behalf of an injured child, and lay a memorial at the feet of his sovereign'.¹⁴⁷ The Afghan war has received an almost unanimously bad press, and so has the weakened and discredited whig government which began it. The 'garbling' accusation was of course only one small side-issue in the great inter-party dispute about the war, but it fitted very neatly into the general opposition case which was argued so powerfully by Kaye. If the war was monumentally immoral and unjust, one could easily assume that its authors were not only capable of resorting to small-time deception and forgery but had a powerful motive as well. 'Guilty men' explanations seem to have an irresistible appeal in all ages. In this case they were particularly appealing to those who believed that Burnes could do no wrong. Had he not described the blue books as 'pure trickery' and announced his intention one day to set the record straight? His defenders could not know, what is now clear beyond any doubt, that Burnes's writings are often couched in a highly excitable style and littered with exaggeration and overstatement. In this case, his vehemence may have owed something to a dash of guilty conscience about his own part in a policy of which he disapproved. But Burnes's views apart, the mere fact that a government was in 1858 persuaded to publish in full what a previous government had only published in part was in itself an event so novel, if not unprecedented, that it was enough to convince many people that there had been deliberate deception when the 1839 blue book was prepared.

But had there? It must be admitted at once that a painstaking search among the extant historical evidence gives no clear answer to the question. So far as one can tell from almost indecipherable pencil markings on the despatches, there were several changes of plan and several persons were involved – the two parliamentary secretaries, Robert Vernon Smith and Robert Gordon, William Cabell and Hobhouse himself.¹⁴⁸ Norris is not by any means the first to emphasize Cabell's

¹⁴⁵ A. Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara* (3 vols., London, 1834). Nearly 900 copies were sold on the first day and it was soon out of print. It was widely and enthusiastically reviewed and French and German translations soon appeared. See *Bombay Times*, 1 Jan. 1842, p. 4; J. H. Gleason, *The Genesis of Russophobia in Great Britain* (Harvard, 1950), p. 163.

¹⁴⁶ Dunlop (incorrectly) in *Hansard*, CLXII, 55.

¹⁴⁷ Kaye, *Afghanistan*, I, 204.

¹⁴⁸ See the various pencilled comments in IO Enclosures to Secret Letters from India, XLVIII, especially nos. 87 and 105 of no. 1 of 8 Feb. 1838; Cabell to Maitland, 10 Mar. 1839 and other evidence in IO L/PS/3/2.

memorandum of February 1839 as the key to the baffling puzzle as to why the papers were presented as they were.¹⁴⁹ And yet, when all is said and done, the only new evidence in that memorandum, written by a junior and elderly official in whom his boss had little confidence, is that the opposition may have been deliberately provoked into demanding more papers. Apart from that, it only confirms what is easily deduced from other evidence – that the positive aim of publication was to explain and justify the decision to invade Afghanistan and the negative aim was to avoid giving offence to Russia. There is no evidence to show how much notice Hobhouse took of the memorandum. And it is quite clear that the extraordinary confusion of chronology and subject-matter implicit in the timing and contents of the various published collections, far from being a deliberate smokescreen devised by Cabell or anyone else on the whig side, was largely the responsibility of the chief opposition spokesman, Lord Ellenborough. Just who it was who decided on the confusing and unnecessary division of Burnes's despatches into two sections on different subjects and why he did so is completely unknown. Hobhouse's diary for 29 May 1842 states categorically that 'alterations and suppressions of the correspondence of Burnes as given in the papers presented to parliament . . . were proposed by Palmerston' but it seems clear from the context of other entries on the same subject in the diary two days later that the alterations he was referring to were those made to avoid 'incriminating the Emperor of Russia'.¹⁵⁰ There is certainly no positive evidence, either here or anywhere else, of deliberate deceit to support the charges which Kaye and others have made. All one can do is look very closely at those charges – and at the arguments of those who denied them. Broadly speaking, the suppressions which were criticized fall into two categories: those which minimized the role of the Russian Government and those which obscured the opinions of Alexander Burnes and Dost Mohamed.¹⁵¹ Only Urquhart and his supporters could see anything sinister in the first of these. The reasons were obvious to contemporaries, even in India.¹⁵² Without any prompting from home, Auckland had watered down the anti-Russian tone of his Simla Declaration¹⁵³ and Hobhouse and Palmerston did the same when publishing their respective blue books.¹⁵⁴ The evidence for the purity

¹⁴⁹ Norris, pp. 222–4; Chavda, *India, Britain, Russia*, p. 44; M. Yapp, *British Policy in Central Asia, 1830–43* (unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, London, 1959), pp. 231–2. This thesis is much more amply documented than Norris's book and anticipates many of its conclusions. Norris appears not to have used it, nor indeed any of the available unpublished doctoral theses which bear upon his subject.

¹⁵⁰ B.M. Add. MSS 43,744, fos. 46, 50–1.

¹⁵¹ Kaye, *Afghanistan*, 1, 358 n and elsewhere argues that the views of Wade were distorted 'almost as shamelessly' as those of Burnes but this view played no part in the garbling story. The best account of Wade's view is E. R. Kapadia, *The Diplomatic Career of Sir Claude Wade* (unpubl. M.A. thesis, London, 1938), ch. 7. Kapadia is critical of Burnes but accepts Kaye's views about the garbling of both Burnes's and Wade's despatches without investigation.

¹⁵² *Friend of India*, 25 Oct. 1838; *Bengal Hurkaru*, 23 Oct. 1838.

¹⁵³ Auckland to Hobhouse, 13 Oct. 1838, B.M. Add. MSS 36,473, fo. 331.

¹⁵⁴ Hobhouse to Auckland, 10 Home Misc. 839, fo. 99; Palmerston to Hobhouse, 28 Jan. 1839, B.M. Add. MSS 46,915, fo. 151.

of their motives in this matter is clear and overwhelming and historians have accepted it.¹⁵⁵

The 'garbling' charge which has stuck has centred almost exclusively on the alleged injustice which was done to the opinions of Burnes and Dost Mohamed. The opposition case as argued by Buist, Baillie, Roebuck, Kaye, Anstey, Dunlop and others was that 'not only were the papers defective in not giving the full truth, but they presented to the House the very opposite of the truth, and that systematically and regularly, facts were concealed . . . so as to give the opposite view to that which the papers really presented'.¹⁵⁶ To support this charge, eight letters were particularly cited. Five of them were only known in their 'ungarbled' form after the publication of the 1859 blue book. Of these five, two were erroneously shown in the 1859 blue book as having been omitted in 1839 when they or their enclosures were in fact published.¹⁵⁷ The charge in their case falls to the ground. Of the remaining three letters, in two cases¹⁵⁸ the omissions made are readily and plausibly explained in other ways and are comparatively trivial, while in the third, although the original despatch was heavily edited from four pages to less than one, the omissions simply do not support the interpretation which the critics put upon them.¹⁵⁹ The astonishing fact is that the case for garbling as mounted so passionately from 1842 when the originals were first published rests upon three letters only. Of the first, written by Burnes to Macnaghten on 20 December 1837, only two paragraphs were given in 1839 and four were omitted which described Dost Mohamed's willingness to co-operate when the Russian agent arrived at Kabul.¹⁶⁰ All the critics maintained that this was part of a deliberate attempt to conceal evidence of the Dost's friendliness.¹⁶¹ If so, one can only say that the blue book editors were extremely careless. Only a few pages further on they gave an extract from the Indian Government's reply of 20 January 1838 which referred to the sense of the omitted paragraphs and added that the governor-general was 'much gratified at the deference to our views shown by Dost Mohamed Khan, in requesting your advice as to the reception of this

¹⁵⁵ Norris (pp. 221 and 227) rather labours this point but he is less original than perhaps he thinks. See for example Jenks, *Urquhart*, p. 244, and Chavda, *India, Britain, Russia*, p. 100.

¹⁵⁶ Dunlop's words, *Hansard*, clxii, 41.

¹⁵⁷ The enclosures to Burnes to Macnaghten, 31 Oct. 1837 are shown as omitted in 1859, pp. 50-52, whereas they were published in 1839, no. 5, pp. 13-14. Similarly, the enclosures to Burnes to Macnaghten, 15 Nov. 1837 are shown as omitted in 1859, pp. 58-9, whereas they were published in 1839, no. 6, p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ Burnes to Macnaghten, 19 Nov. 1837 and 18 Feb. 1838, given in 1839, no. 6, pp. 4 and 10 and, with omissions correctly marked, in 1859, pp. 60 and 148.

¹⁵⁹ Burnes to Auckland, 23 Dec. 1837, given in 1839, no. 6, p. 7 and, with omissions correctly marked, in 1859, p. 89. See *Hansard*, clxii, 47-50; Newcastle, *Falsification of diplomatic documents*, p. 9.

¹⁶⁰ 1839, no. 6, p. 4 and, with omissions correctly marked, in 1859, p. 80.

¹⁶¹ *Hansard*, lxiv, 440-1; xcvi, 1211-3; clxii, 46-7; *Report of the East India Committee*, p. 27; Kaye, *Afghanistan*, 1, 195; Newcastle, *Falsification of diplomatic documents*, p. 13.

agent'.¹⁶² Surprisingly enough, it was this letter which constituted the second prop to the opposition case. The letter was certainly heavily edited in 1839: the first fourteen as well as the last seven paragraphs were entirely omitted. The intention said the accusers, was to conceal the fact that Burnes was advocating a policy in the Peshawar and Kandahar issues entirely different from that of his government.¹⁶³ They are absolutely right. The omitted paragraphs contain a crushing rebuke to Burnes for disobeying the letter of his instructions over Kandahar and a not very delicate hint that he had been untrue to the spirit of his instructions over Peshawar. No one could have argued *at the time* that the publication of these often peremptory paragraphs in 1839 would have been anything but humiliating for an ambitious and pushing young political agent like Burnes. They contain, moreover, one of the clearest expositions of the policy the Indian Government was trying to pursue and which in another context it would have been glad to have had published. Only later, when that policy appeared to have failed, could there have been any virtue in having argued for a different line of policy and having disobeyed instructions. The final prop to the garbling argument, and the only one used to support the claim that Burnes's views were not only suppressed but actually misrepresented, is the blue book treatment of his despatch of 26 January 1838.¹⁶⁴ All the critics cited this as the classic example of forgery.¹⁶⁵ It was this one which launched Kaye into the polemic quoted at the beginning of this article, and even Norris describes the omissions as 'sometimes questionable'.¹⁶⁶ Most of the criticism was directed at the first paragraph in which the opening words of the first sentence, where Burnes acknowledges the receipt of earlier letters containing the governor-general's views, were omitted. This, said the critics, was a deliberate attempt to make it look as if all the views expressed in the rest of the document were Burnes's, when in fact he disagreed with most of them and was merely being the mouthpiece of his government. In this way, ran the argument, it reinforced the suppressions in the letter of 20 January so that both together conspired to conceal the evidence that Burnes disagreed with Auckland. That this disagreement was concealed is true, but since it had brought down on Burnes's head a stiff reprimand the concealment is not very surprising. In fact, the 1839 extract of his 26 January letter contains ample evidence that Burnes was presenting his government's views – one paragraph actually begins, 'To these arguments I opposed the views of the British Government'.

¹⁶² Macnaghten to Burnes, 20 Jan. 1838, given in 1839, no. 6, p. 8 and, with omissions correctly marked, in 1859, p. 111.

¹⁶³ Buist, *Burnes*, pp. 56–7; Kaye, *Afghanistan*, 1, 191 n; Newcastle, *Falsification of diplomatic documents*, p. 8; *Hansard*, CLXII, 50–1.

¹⁶⁴ To Macnaghten, given in 1839, no. 5, p. 22 and, with omissions correctly marked, in 1859, p. 120.

¹⁶⁵ *Hansard*, LXVII, 144 and 209; XCVI, 1209; CLXII, 50–3; Buist, *Burnes*, pp. 29 and 49–56; Kaye, *Afghanistan*, 1, 199 n and 203; Newcastle, *Falsification of diplomatic documents*, p. 8; Flournoy, *Parliament and War*, p. 21 n.

¹⁶⁶ Norris, p. 447.

An equally plausible explanation for the omission of all references to the earlier instructions, none of which were published in 1839, is that it was to prevent any subsequent request by the opposition for them. One of the problems always facing anyone who edited a collection of official correspondence for publication was the need to ensure that the collection was internally consistent and self-sufficient, without any references to matter which was not included.¹⁶⁷

It will be seen at once that this was an astonishingly slender foundation to support the charges of guilt, lies, forgery, deceit, and garbling which were made for more than twenty-one years and which turned the 1839 blue book into a by-word for official malpractice. It is in fact nothing of the kind and is no worse in the extent of its suppressions than many other examples both before and after.¹⁶⁸ If the 1839 editors really intended to suppress all references to the views of Burnes and the friendship of Dost Mohamed, as was often alleged, then one must only conclude that they were utterly incompetent. The 1839 blue book *does* contain evidence that the Dost was co-operative and friendly – nobody could bear stronger witness to this than critics like David Urquhart and Henry Tucker¹⁶⁹ – and it *does* reveal Burnes's doubts about the feasibility of Auckland's policy and his own preference for alliance with Dost Mohamed.¹⁷⁰ One might also add, although the critics never did, that the 1859 blue book reveals that a great deal favourable to the government's case and hostile to the Dost was omitted in 1839 too.¹⁷¹ The plain fact is that the Kaye thesis does not bear examination. All its examples of garbling are capable of other explanations. There is no evidence of any deliberate intention to deceive. And there is no evidence of guilt. On the contrary, even the most personal of Hobhouse's or Palmerston's letters and diaries reveal only irritation at the absurdity and injustice of the garbling charges. It is true that Hobhouse was not very happy about the blue book early in 1839.¹⁷² He was aware that a number of eminent Indian authorities were bitterly hostile to Auckland's Afghan policy, he was acutely conscious of the weakness of his government and the belligerence of the opposition, and he had some private doubts of his own about Auckland's handling of some issues. So far as the publication of the documents was concerned he would have preferred to publish either nothing or everything and he disliked the inevitable compromise which had to be adopted. But, significantly enough, it was not the fact that the views of Indian officials had to be suppressed which worried him, but that they were too much revealed:

¹⁶⁷ In 1860 a suppressed despatch on the Savoy-Nice affair was only known about because it was referred to in another collection, *Hansard*, clvi, 2225.

¹⁶⁸ Temperley & Penson, *Blue Books*, pp. 4-6, 58, 79-82, 128, 218-19; S. Lambert, 'A Century of Diplomatic Blue Books', *Historical Journal*, x (1967), 127.

¹⁶⁹ Both of them were critical of the Indian Government's policy precisely because, on the evidence of the blue books, it rejected Dost Mohamed's friendship. See D. Urquhart, *Diplomatic Transactions*, p. 131; *Report of the East India Committee*, pp. 41-3.

¹⁷⁰ No. 5, pp. 32 and 37; no. 6, p. 8.

¹⁷¹ As for example Wade to Macnaghten, 21 Mar. 1838, 1859, p. 198.

¹⁷² See his gloomy letter to Auckland of 16 Mar., IO Home Misc. 839, fo. 109.

The selection has been made in the best manner circumstances would allow and the documents were carefully looked over by Mr Macneill [incidentally, a pro-Burnes man]; but I have still some misgivings as to the effect their publication may produce in India. Some of your functionaries may complain of the exposure of their views and proceedings, and I confess that nothing but stern necessity justifies the course we have pursued. The truth is we had no choice.¹⁷³

Hobhouse must have known very well that any attempt to deliberately misrepresent the views of a man like Burnes would, in an age of rapidly improving steam communication between Bombay and London, have been revealed inside six months.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, the existence of a rift between Burnes and Auckland was already public knowledge before any decisions about the contents of the blue books were made.¹⁷⁵ Besides Hobhouse had the highest regard for Burnes and had only just secured for him a lieutenant-colonelcy and a knighthood. Far from doubting the wisdom of Auckland's policy and being ashamed of it, as Kaye and the others believed, he was convinced in 1839 that it was basically sound and necessary and went on believing and saying this even after the disasters of 1842 had converted most people to the opposite point of view. In other words, not only is the Kaye thesis unsubstantiated by the historical evidence and by its own arguments, but it is basically improbable. The 1839 blue book was designed, in Cabell's words, to make out 'a complete justification of the proceedings of the Governor-General' by showing that '*no other course was open* to his adoption than that which he was forced at last to pursue'.¹⁷⁶ It was no part of this brief to publish at length the contrary views of a subordinate, and sometimes insubordinate, official like Burnes when those views formed no part of the policy which was finally adopted. The blue book was not intended to give a full and fair exposition of the views of Burnes or any other individual but to explain why the government had acted as it did. It is perfectly true that many people gained the impression that Burnes was far more committed to Auckland's policy than was in fact the case.¹⁷⁷ But it is an enormous step, which the evidence does not support, to argue that this impression was *deliberately* created. Kaye, who more than anyone else gave the garbling accusation historical respectability, was so impelled by his own interpretation of the war as an evil thing that he was able to take this step with ease. The 'guilty men' interpretation was so natural and inevitable a part of his thesis that he was incapable of giving those men credit for any other but guilty motives, even when more obvious explanations lay to hand.

¹⁷³ To Auckland, 11 Apr. 1839, *ibid.* fo. 121.

¹⁷⁴ Only a few months later he was complaining about the number of Indian officials who were corresponding privately with members of the opposition, to Auckland, 22 Sept. 1839, *ibid.* fo. 187. And this included Burnes, Kaye, *Tucker*, p. 503; Norris, p. 228; F. McAlister, *Memoir of the Right Hon. Sir John McNeill* (London, 1910), p. 249.

¹⁷⁵ Anonymous letter from 'Zeta' to Hobhouse, 1 Jan. 1839, B.M. Add. MSS 36,470, fo. 1.

¹⁷⁶ Above, p. 232, n. 18. The italicized words were underlined and ticked, presumably by Hobhouse.

¹⁷⁷ The Newcastle pamphlet, pp. 9-10, cites an interesting example of this.

The Kaye version has had a good run but one must conclude with Norris that it must be abandoned. Not necessarily for the reasons which Norris gives¹⁷⁸ – that no parliamentary majority could ever be found to support it, nor even that political opponents like Peel and Fitzgerald in an era of bitter party strife refused to support it. One could, without being cynical, explain both of these things in other ways. But simply because the Kaye version is unsupported either by the evidence or by its own arguments and is basically improbable. It is always a pity to lay an axe to a fine historical growth but this one, involving as it does false charges of forgery and lies and guilt, is better felled. One cannot help wishing that it had never grown at all. Hobhouse's first instinct to publish either all or nothing was in retrospect the correct one, but both alternatives were impossible. There remained only the third possibility – to publish something – and from that everything else followed. A recent historian has shown¹⁷⁹ by an example from a later period how 'the power of omission which the government possessed was a weapon easily turned against the user'. So it was in this case. Perhaps the best conclusion to the whole affair appeared in *The Times* leader of 21 March 1861.

It is easy for us, sitting apart and out of peril, to say that the letters ought to have been altogether withheld, or published entire with such comments as Govt. might choose to add in self defence. They took, as they thought, a middle course – like other middle courses, not a dignified one. It answered the purpose for the time without a direct sacrifice of truth, and that is all that can be said for it.



¹⁷⁸ Norris, pp. 423 and 442.

¹⁷⁹ S. Lambert, *The Influence of Parliament upon the Foreign Policy of the Gladstone Government* (unpubl. M.A. thesis, London, 1949), pp. 58 ff.